OPENING STATEMENT OF
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY, AND STANDARDS
COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

"Health Care Information Technology: What are the Opportunities for and Barriers to Interoperable Health Information Technology Systems?"
February 23, 2006
12:00 p.m. (PST) to 2:00 p.m.
Providence St. Vincent Medical Center
Souther Auditorium
9205 SW Barnes Road
Portland, Oregon 97225

Good afternoon. Welcome to today's hearing entitled "Health Care Information Technology: What are the Opportunities for and Barriers to Interoperable Health Information Technology Systems?"

Today we are here to discuss:
- the potential benefits of IT to health care providers and consumers,
- the impact of IT on health care costs and quality, and
- the major challenges to the widespread use of IT in the health care industry.

We will learn about federal, state and private-sector efforts to promote electronic systems that enable health care providers to access patient data from any location.

Information technology has profoundly changed the way we live and work. Computers are everywhere, and we increasingly expect their conveniences to touch on every aspect of our daily lives. However, go into a doctor's office and in most cases, the records of that visit, the prescriptions that are written and referrals to specialists will all be made on paper. Many health experts tout the benefits of converting to electronic records for billing, referrals and prescriptions. Experts claim that not only would it be cheaper in the long run and more convenient, but the conversion to electronic records would also enable doctors to share patient data more easily, which would make for better diagnosis and treatment, prevent deaths from drug interactions and allergic reactions, and help public health agencies track diseases in populations.

In addition to serving on the Science Committee, I also Chair the subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness under Homeland Security. During one of our recent hearings we held on the Pandemic Flu, we heard testimony on the real world benefits of IT in the health sector. One of the best ways to slow the spread of a pandemic is to quickly identify health trends in an area. Health IT enables us to do that. We must recognize that we are incapable of storing, moving and accessing information in times of crisis. Health IT would have been beneficial in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as well, when a lack of electronic patient medical records contributed to difficulties and delays in the medical treatment of evacuees.

There are many challenges to the widespread adoption of electronic health records and linking healthcare providers' computers to exchange information. These systems are often very expensive and complicated to implement. Standards are needed to allow different systems to "talk" to each other. There are serious security and privacy concerns associated with putting sensitive patient data on computers. Experts must consider these and other factors when thinking about the use of IT in health care.

I want to thank Congressman David Wu, the ranking member on the Subcommittee on Environment, Technology, and Standards, for suggesting the topic for this hearing, which is a matter of great interest to myself and my constituents, as I am sure it is to Mr. Wu's. I also want to thank our witnesses, who have taken time out of their busy schedules to testify before us today. I look forward to learning more about what our witnesses from the region are doing to help health care in the Pacific Northwest become more IT-enabled, and how the lessons learned here can be applied nation-wide.